

THE *Final Straw*

A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW

The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world.

You can send us letters at:

The Final Straw Radio
PO Box 6004
Asheville, NC 28816
USA

Email us at:

thefinalstrawradio@riseup.net
or **thefinalstrawradio@protonmail.com**

To hear our past shows for free, visit:

<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org>

To support transcription and zine-making efforts which are funded by donations, visit:

<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/donate/>

or via Patreon:

<https://www.patreon.com/tfstr>

or via LiberaPay, which does not take a cut of the payments:

<https://liberapay.com/The-Final-Straw-Radio/>

revolutionary arts with signal journal



THE FINAL STRAW RADIO - JULY 30, 2023

Ian interviews Josh MacPhee and Alec Dunn, co-editors of *Signal*, about the recently published eighth volume of the *Journal of International Political Graphics and Culture*. They discuss their motivations and experiences producing *Signal* for over a decade, designing print media in the digital age, and their work as part of Justseeds Artists' Cooperative, long-running, geographically dispersed artist collective dedicated to the production of radical art for grassroots movements.

Justseeds website: <https://justseeds.org/>

Search for this interview title at <https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/> to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

lived together in Chicago and there was a new group doing a presentation on a wheat pasting campaign, and the idea at the time was that people there can go and learn how to do this and go out and do it right away. And the reality is that – I don't remember what this it was about, prison or something – but Josh had spent a number of years involved in prison abolition movements, had made art with people, and had developed relations with people and got a crew out to go out and do this action. Rarely is it something you can just do on the spot and have be effective. There's so much work in the background of doing effective cultural work. And some of that work is just spending time in the movement and in the community. So it's not necessarily about being in a specific organization. To me, that is oftentimes what we cover are people who have been thoughtful about their work and their communities and the movements that matter to them and take some creative approaches to going about it and pivoting when things aren't working, having happy accidents when things do.

J: Yeah, the propaganda or agitprop overlap with fine art traditions and design, commercial design, but they're not the same thing. They have their own concerns and their own needs. And some of those are relatively universal, and some of those are movements-specific. And that part of what I hope that *Signal* can do is it can help illuminate that this is a unique tradition. And that while it's not completely separate from the things that we call art or the things that we call design, to think about it as its own territory really helps from the perspective of makers and of movements to make better agitprop, to realize that there are things really useful, that making material that people are familiar with, so it's easy for them to pick it up and take some ownership over it, is often more powerful than something that's like brand new, which is like very different than if you're doing commercial design work and you want to make you're trying to sell a new product, or you're doing fine art and it's all about newness. That, in fact, newness is not necessarily the best thing when you're doing agitprop. Doing things that are collectively produced is often quite difficult when you're working in the terrain of fine art or commercial design.

But within movements, it tends to help generate senses of collective authorship and ownership. And those multiple voices adding in can really speak to the different elements and aspects of people who are part of an organization or a movement or a group that's trying to do something. And so there's just different concerns. By putting to the foreground lots of different examples and the ways that people have negotiated and engaged with these questions, we just hope that that will be helpful and useful for people that are continuing to do that into the future.

TFSR: Okay, I think that I have what I need. Thank you again for taking the time to do this again. I really appreciate it.

J: No worries.

So you maybe are lucky if what you make gets seen because of some algorithmic glitch or some gatekeeper lets it through. But the reality is that we just don't own the digital means of reproducing our ideas, but we do have the ability to own the analog means. Maybe it's an old-school left argument about controlling the means of production. But the physical means of production are much more accessible and easier to own and have some control over and management of.

A: I would just dovetail on there too. There's definitely room for people who want to do this digitally. Both Josh and I like print media. But whether or not that has to be the way it has to be, for us, it's a way that we can have longer form ideas. Images have a more impactful space that you engage with more as opposed to just flicking past. For other people, that might not be true. And there are certainly a lot of people out there... there's many Instagram accounts that I follow that are doing archives of left covers of books and posters and things like that. Lots of stuff like that is out there. And I don't think us being in this lane and us moving in that lane... it's synergistic, I hope. And I don't feel like we have to crossover at this point, either, which is maybe at some point, it would feel like you had to, but there's plenty of people in the digital space doing archiving and documenting.

For us, it gives us a chance to really highlight and focus in on some works and some ideas and give it some space. And at least in my particular reading habits, people of our generation, people that I know, which are not all of my generation, it allows a further sense of space and focus on that work. I know people who just read things on their phones, and I just couldn't do it. I just don't... It's too distracting. It's too small. That might not be the case for others. Is that too open-minded, Josh? What do you think?

J: No, no, that's good. I'm not against the digital, I just think that there needs to be a little bit more of an open-eyed reality check about what it is and what it isn't. The vast majority of the Internet is a giant graveyard of websites that no one goes to and aren't kept up because there's this promise it's really easy to make a website. In reality, it's actually quite difficult to maintain one. And it's expensive. And publishing in physical form is actually cheaper and it lasts longer.

TFSR: So to bring our discussion to a close. What do you see as the role of propaganda in movement-making? What are the qualities that you think that make it effective? And what do you see as its greatest potential and greatest limitations?

A: One thing that we knew going in, I don't think this is new to us, but it's something we learn continually is that there is no set formula for what makes good propaganda in political movements. It's very unique to the situation with the artists, to the movement itself, and just to the spirit behind it. So, there's not necessarily a slam dunk there. But I do think – maybe this is the slam dunk – is that what makes effective propaganda in movements is when people are involved with a movement or have some basis in that movement. Doesn't have to be necessarily with an organization, but a long time coming in that movement.

I remember there was a long time ago before *Signal* existed, Josh and I

TFSR: Thanks for taking the time to talk to me today. Would you mind introducing yourself and giving your preferred pronouns as well as any affiliations that you think might be relevant to our conversation?

Alec: My name is Alec Dunn, I use he/him pronouns and I'm one of the co-editors of *Signal: A Journal of International Political Graphics & Culture* as well as a member of the Just Seeds Artists Cooperative.

Josh: And my name is Josh MacPhee, I use he/him pronouns, and I'm also a co-editor of *Signal* with Alec. I'm also a member of the Justseeds artists cooperative. And I'm part of a project here in Brooklyn, New York, called Interference Archive, which is a public-facing archive of the culture and material produced by social movements.

TFSR: Can you tell the listeners about your respective backgrounds as it relates to this work?

J: Both Alex and I came up in the do-it-yourself punk scene and subculture and were politicized through that. I got my start making applied art, design, and graphics by working with bands and people in the punk scene, doing t-shirt designs and record covers and flyers for shows. And then tattoo designs and other things. Then got involved in self-publishing and zine publishing. And then a lot of the skill sets were born out of that, dovetailed into very similar parallel work but with community and social justice organizations, which is where a lot of the cultural work that I do now is focused.

Alec: I don't really have a lot to add there, so I'll just say probably the same thing. Josh grew up in Boston and spent time in DC and Ohio, and I grew up on the West Coast in Portland, and maybe there are regional differences, and had spent time in New Orleans. But both of us got the basis for design out of being around music scenes, and punk especially, but both of us were always doing political graphics. Even when I was a teenager in high school, they were crude, and I wouldn't want anyone to see them necessarily, but it's been a long interest and hobby and passion.

TFSR: Okay, based on my research, Justseeds has been around for 25 years at this point. Can you tell me a little bit about the evolution of the project? And at this point, can you talk about what exactly Justseeds encompasses in terms of the work that you all do?

J: Following up on some of these background questions, starting in the mid-1990s, I and a lot of people who were doing similar work to what I was doing started producing material for different movements. And the context back then, 30 years ago, particularly the economic context, was really different. Most of the organizations that I was working with had very, very small budgets, and a focus on art and culture was not really part of the program. They were interested in and I worked with groups to design posters and T-shirts and things like that. But there was rarely much money to pay for those things. I started getting paid in material. So I would

design a poster for an organization, and they would give me 100 posters. Then I would design a t-shirt for a march or a rally, and I would get a stack of T-shirts. And then while doing that work, I was making parallel work on the side around similar issues: around mass incarceration in the United States, around housing, around solidarity issues internationally, anti-war.

Starting in 1997-1998, I realized that it would be really nice to actually be able to make some portion of a living doing this work, rather than just working a day job. At the time, often, I worked an overnight job at a coffee shop, which was called Kinkos, which was a central hub for both zine culture and punk culture and lots of different music subcultures and political self-publishing. But rather than just doing those things, it would be nice to actually make part of a living doing the work that I loved. And so I started making these paper catalogs that started out as just one sheet of paper and then became little stapled-together catalogs that had pictures of the T-shirts that I had and the posters and things. And I started mailing them out to everyone that I knew, physical mail. I would get a list of addresses, and I would send these things out to everyone. And they would all have a little form that you could cut out, where you would check a box "I want this poster or this shirt," and you'd stick a \$10 bill into an envelope and mail it to a PO box in Chicago that I had.

And that's basically how Justseeds started. I would get an order every month, every couple of weeks: "Hey, I'd like this t-shirt, here's 10 bucks. I'd like this poster, here's five bucks." And I would put them in the mail and send them out. Not only did people start ordering things, and that picked up, so that it went from being an order a month to an order a week to an order a day, but also people who were doing very similar work to what I was doing started contacting me and saying, "Hey, will you help me sell my stuff?" And Alec was one of those people. There were a number of other people that all became the central hub of Justseeds when we became a cooperative in 2006.

TFSR: Can you talk a little bit about what you attribute the longevity of the cooperative to? Are there any major cons or negative qualities to working in a cooperative?

A: I'm kind of drawing a blank. What has made the cooperative have some longevity? And I know that that is a real thing. Someone had called us the last legacy activist project of the early 2000s that was still going, which was embarrassing. Anyway, partly, we're geographically dispersed, so that is a big disadvantage and also a little bit of an advantage in that some of the wear and tear of being around each other. I guess everything I would say I would see as both an advantage and disadvantage. So geographically dispersed, we're not always up in each other's shit, to put it bluntly. Cooperative or not, we do collective decision-making, and we're still in an evolving process 20 years later on how to decide these bigger issues with the group.

But in general, we have a loose, for better or worse, set of values that we work around and do try and have a lot of trust with each other as far as cooperative projects. And not everyone having to be involved with everything all the time. Certainly, some tensions have arisen at various times. And we're not strictly ideological. We cover probably a wide swath of left politics from liberal to revolution-

but also work within the context of social movements and publishing houses in other forms. He did illustrations for the *Guardian* for years. So he weaved in and out of both the ultra-left and the mainstream. And there are a number of people like that that we have been influenced by: David King, another British designer that maybe Alec will talk about Dea Trier Mørch, an illustrator and designer from Copenhagen, and people like that.

A: Yeah, and because we are a publication that's focused on art and design, art and design are important for us to have look good and match the context of our stories. Josh did mention David King who was an English graphic designer who died a couple of years ago and whose work was ubiquitous in ways that once you figured out who he was, you started understanding that there was more and more of your life that things that you'd like because how they looked, and there were a lot of them are designed by David King. He was a just great, excellent graphic designer. He was probably most well known for doing the cover of Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* a bunch of classic rock album covers, and then in the 70s and 80s, did a lot of the graphic design, not the logo itself, but for Rock Against Racism, a lot of anti-apartheid graphics, and had a very Soviet-influenced bold, colorful, big Sans Serif type, just beautiful, vibrant work. He was a historian, did book covers for Penguin, did tons of graphic design, and did a lot of political work. So that was definitely a big influence on us as well.

J: The underground press like the work of Emory Douglas in the Black Panther Paper, the graphics that came out of the AIDS movement in the 80s and 90s. All these things were influences. And all of them in different ways touched on publishing, whether or not it was in the form of an ongoing publication, like the Black Panther newspaper, or in the form of serialized broadsheets or flyers like that came out of the Act Up and AIDS movement. Print and publishing have always been central to the forms of aesthetics that we're drawn to.

TFSR: Most if not all of the stuff covered in *Signal* is grounded in the physical rather than the digital realm. What do you see as the special value of physical media in the digital age?

J: You can touch it. This question around digital verse or parallel to analog can go in so many different directions. To keep it contained, we're the last pre-born digital generation. So both of us were born in a time before there was the expectation that we would be seeing things on a screen.

To be honest, I just have a nostalgia/natural orientation towards physical print because it's what I grew up with. It's what I learned to read with. It's how I learned to make things. But beyond that, the reality is that we can take a piece of paper and we can put an image and some text on it and we can throw it onto a copy machine or a risograph or even an inkjet printer and we have almost total control over what that is, what's on it, how it gets distributed, who sees it. And then the reality with the internet is that there's the illusion of a certain digital democracy. But the fact of the matter is that 99% of internet and even social media traffic goes through a very, very, very small handful of websites that we don't own or control.

from 1972 to 1975, or something. Or when we were starting out, you'd have like zine articles. People who were interested in things and just did a teeny bit of research and wrote a little thing about something. And now the equivalent of that, I guess, is blog posts that exist about some of these things. And we were really interested in trying to find a space in between those, that we're interested in writing that is accessible to a general audience, and particularly to the people that make this culture. But that's serious, that isn't just a toss-off paragraph to put with a handful of images, but actually is considered and takes into account the context in which material was made and the impacts it potentially had. And that sweet spot of writing is hard to find. And that's part of why we tend to decide the table of contents as we're putting an issue together because we're not drawing on this massive well of 500 articles that have been submitted. We're scrambling to try to get people to get us material and to find the things to cobble together an issue because there just has not been support for that populist but engaged writing around culture and politics, at least not in the United States.

TFSR: Can you speak to publications or design philosophies, whether they are mainstream or of the niche, activist variety that has influenced the way you are putting this together? It's certainly its own distinctive thing, but you can also make the case that *Signal* is part of a lineage, so to speak.

A: Well, I would say, as far as where it exists on the landscape of current graphic design, it's a journal, it's not a book. So there are things that we carry over in each issue. And in that way, we are not like many other journals. A lot of journals have a very set design pattern. They use certain typography or the way that they box in images or don't have images at all often. I was thinking that some weekly publications do some innovative stuff and graphic design. I don't know. Josh, you should go for it.

J: I was thinking maybe just to tell a story. When I was 19, I went into a bookshop in Washington, DC, a used bookshop, and buried in a pile of old books, I found this copy of the Cienfuegos Press anarchist review, the fourth issue, I think. Cienfuegos Press was this British anarchist publishing house that existed in the 1970s and into the early 1980s. They did this anarchist review, which at its peak, 3rd-5th issues, was this oversized, maybe 9x12 inch dense, packed 200-250 page compendium catalog of all things anti-authoritarian. And I've carried that book with me the rest of my life, and part of it is that it's just chock full of so many little things that you can pick it up. It's one of those things, you can pick up 10 different times and open it and you'll find 10 different things.

But one of the probably most impactful parts about it is that it was designed and illustrated by this British anarchist artist named Clifford Harper. Clifford Harper was a big influence both on me and on Alec, in different ways. He put out a very influential publication called *Anarchy: A Graphic Guide*, which was almost a clip art book of anarchist history that hundreds and hundreds of people have taken images out of and repurposed and reused on flyers and books and record covers and T-shirts and things like that. And he was really an influential point of entry into how one could be an engaged artist and designer and do what you want,

ary at times, and people express different political views. And that has also been something of an advantage. At various points, we have talked about trying to make points of unity between us, and in some ways, our longevity is that we haven't had really strict ideological boundaries that we draw ourselves around.

TFSR: Pivoting a little bit to the topic at hand, PM Press just published issue number eight of *Signal*. It is a decade-plus project for you guys, is that correct?

A: Yeah, we are 12 years now.

J: We conceptualized it in 2008-2009, and then the first issue came out in 2010.

TFSR: Can you talk about the origins, the initial intentions, and maybe how your considerations and goals have changed over the course of its life?

A: Sure, both Josh and I have been fans of political art, especially from other countries. And especially when the time we're starting out, it could be difficult to find. So we both had spent a good amount of time in libraries and looking at the foreign language section of used bookstores for art books and old Eastern Bloc catalogs, things like that. We both had accrued similar interests and knowledge. And a lot of stuff was fairly big, but the things we were interested in were fairly well-known, but there was not a lot published at the time and certainly not a lot in print. So I'm talking about things like the Taller de Gráfica Popular which was a Mexican print collective that started in the 1930s. Atelier Populaire which was the loose name for young print makers following the May 1960s uprisings in France. Russian constructivists, German expressionists, all that stuff. It's almost canonical at this point, but at the time, you had to dig pretty deep to find stuff about Leopoldo Méndez or Elizabeth Catlett.

So, we both were big fans of that, as well as most of the printmakers we knew. And Josh and I just got a little bit nerdier about trying to draw connections and look for stuff. So we talked about wanting to do a publication. We both felt there was a lot to learn from previous graphical movements. There was so much richness there. In the scene that Justseeds came out of and that we'd come out of, it was a fairly barren environment, and we felt a little bit messianic or something about trying to infuse more art into that world. And also OSPAAAL the Cubans group had so much color and life, and it was such a different graphic language. And we were both very influenced by work that was being sent to Josh from a friend of ours in Japan of Japanese political graphic design, which just seems to have a totally different basis and format and structure. Just a very different aesthetic. And feeling like those things could help us in the US expand the idea of what we think is possible and enrich also our graphic palette. So that was the beginning. Josh should probably pitch in here as well.

What is interesting is originally we talked about trying to do stuff that was focused on international political art, with the idea of having a US-based audience. And over time, what we found is we actually have a fairly large international audience. I don't know what it would be as a breakdown, probably, it's still mostly US.

But it feels like a lot of the interaction we get from people on email and feedback is mostly from international people.

TFSR: When you say what's possible, are you talking in terms of design or from a political perspective?

A: Both, from design and also from the role of designer or artist or creative worker within a political movement. As Josh had noted, when Justseeds started, when he had started doing art in the late 90s-early 2000s, the role of the artist was very pushed to the side, like make a poster, and maybe the image you made would be shrunk down and thrown in the corner, or pixelated or whatever. And so seeing the prominent role and freedom and resources that people had in political movements the world over or that they created was inspiring and very different than how creative work was treated in political struggles in the US.

J: To paint a picture, so to speak, in the mid to late 90s, if you went to a demonstration in the United States, the most common thing that you would probably get handed would be an 8.5x11 sheet of paper that was filled on both sides with 10 point type. And maybe there'd be a corner of a child who had been bombed or something in a little image. Things were type-heavy. They were visually not particularly nuanced. And then if you were coming from a more anarchist or anti-authoritarian perspective, and you were a maker like Alec and I, people would get upset if you used anything other than red and black. There were really strong conventions around what was acceptable and readable as political in this way or that way. And neither of us was really interested in that. And we felt that it not just harmed to the visual culture, but it actually made politics not particularly attractive. And so we were really interested in trying to look at examples from history and around the world when other visual regimes existed.

TFSR: So the thing that strikes me from initially taking a look at *Signal* is how deeply considered everything is. From a design perspective, can you discuss some of the design choices you've made over the course of the publication and what informed them? A few things that struck me in the latest issue, for example, are your use of landscape images situated vertically, and that odd-numbered pages have block text, while even-numbered pages have the text in columns. What did you want *Signal* to be, and what did you not want it to be? You touched on this prior but maybe a little deeper into it.

J: From the get-go, *Signal* has always had this primary tension at its core, which is our desire to give space and voice to all of these different images and histories and narratives. And at the same time, work within the limits of what was possible with the publishing that we had access to. PM has been amazingly generous and has facilitated this project now for over a decade. But part of the ability for us to pitch and even get this project started was to say we're going to have to do something relatively small. It's 5x7. Each one is not a coffee table book. They're pocket-sized because that's what we could afford to do. That's what PM had the capacity to print in full color. Limited page count. And so it's always been this interesting tension. The

design is really driven by a desire to push as much into each issue as possible. But at the same time, try to give each feature its own space, both so that it's readable, but also so that the images are able to breathe, so people can take some time with them. And some of the things, like taking a horizontal image and turning it on its head so that it's vertical, some of that is space. If you make it vertical, you can make it bigger, because the publication is vertical. But some of it is also just trying to upturn traditional conventions so that the eye has to turn a little bit to look at something a little differently to get people to engage in a way that is different than when you just pick up a standard trade paperback and go page by page.

TFSR: Do you approach each issue as a new concept, or are you trying to create continuity across iterations?

A: We have some continuity. We definitely have some formats that we import issue to issue. And some of that you noted with the columns versus two blocks of text and things like that. A lot of that is probably even a little bit unconscious. But there's a way that I probably have in my head at this point developed how *Signal* looks. We use a similar font to read that we find to be very readable at a small size. So there is some design continuity. We do try and do a new design for each article and each issue, and as far as making a conscious choice of what's going to be an issue and whether that balance is out there, that doesn't happen at all. We might have an article that we hold back from an issue for space or for whatever reason, and you can place that in a later issue when you want to, but for the most part, we're mostly dependent on contributors and on time and getting things in. And so each issue ends up a little bit accidental. And especially even when they had just one issue out, there was a good response to it. But people could say this is a hodgepodge of articles. And now with eight issues, and the 9th coming and the 10th coming after that, you started seeing them as a collection. And it creates an interesting tapestry or mosaic of ideas about what political art can be and how art is used in social movements and political struggles around the world.

So to answer your question, is there anything deliberate about it? Now, it's pretty random, issue to issue, although Josh and I both have probably ideas about what fits in the magazine as a whole and what doesn't. And those can be very broad ideas. One thing, which we're more probably open to in the beginning but probably less interested in now, and that's not across the board, we still have fine art in there, but we're less interested in things that appear in galleries or are conceived as fine art or art projects that are political. We are more interested in applied arts, meaning things like design, illustration, printmaking, and sculpture that are meant to be used by activists or movements directly.

J: It's also important to point out that maybe it's changed a little bit over the past decade, but when we started, and it's still largely true now, that this place that we're locating our interests, which is the intersection of social movements and cultural production, is not one that there's a lot of writing about. And in particular, the writing tends to fall either into the heavily academic realm in which you'll have highly theoretical volume about a very specific time and place in which something like this happens. So the role of pirate radio in the Quebecois national struggle